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ABSTRACT

The importance of career education in the curriculum of gifted elementary students is discussed. Students in the author's classes used the Department of Labor's Occupations Outlook Handbook to select career fields and request information about jobs of interest. With materials gathered from this and other sources, the students discussed aspects of the job and the whole area of interviewing for jobs. Children were involved in setting up miniature businesses, including such facets as costing, advertising, bookkeeping, and marketing. Interviews with people in professions the children were exploring were another aspect of the program. The unit concluded with students securing summer employment (paid or volunteer) to obtain first hand experience in the world of work. (PHR)

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CAREER EDUCATION - AN EXCEPTIONAL ADDITION TO A GIFTED CURRICULUM

In many ways superior or gifted youngsters tune in earlier and more perceptively to adult roles and goals. Because they march to a somewhat different drummer at a somewhat faster tempo, they're more likely than your average child to seek out long term objectives and perceive as relevant aspirations more typical of upper adolescent students. For this reason the gifted and talented are uniquely responsive to a curriculum that has been tragically slighted by generations of professional educators who have favored a purely "academic" approach to educating the child with above average mental ability.

Despite the fact that between eighty and one hundred thousand hours of the superior student's future will depend on his or her skill in identifying appropriate and potentially satisfying career choices, almost nothing is done to inform and prepare our most able youngsters to meet this challenge. We've relegated career education and a knowledge of job search skills to non-academic vocational programs deemed solely appropriate for the non-college bound student or the potential drop-out. Somehow this is all based on the vague premise that the bright or gifted achiever will "get it later." To say that "later" never comes is apt, but irrelevant, since even if it did come at some point in his or her undergraduate or graduate training, it would invariably be too little and too late for the exceptional youngster's maximum benefit. For it is this student above all others whose understanding of the "ins and outs" of the world of work and of the vast array of career options whose natural motivation and enthusiasm needs to be tapped at an impressionable age. Early knowledge in this vital field can trigger the kind of enormous devotion to growth and attainment that may one day result in a career choice profoundly beneficial to student and society alike.

Consider some of these career projects I used with my very special upper elementary classes of above average students throughout the nineteen seventies. Results were generally most encouraging; much enthusiasm on their part and a pleasure to me to encounter a

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Career Education - An Exceptional Addition To A Gifted Curriculum

class eager to utilize the whole panoply of skills we refer to as the "three R's" in the pursuit of a subject which had really captivated their inquisitive minds.

Initially I had my students start to analyze and evaluate their own areas of strengths and weaknesses, interests and non-interests, and special talents (sometimes in concert with supportive, but non-overwhelming parental input). In addition, of course, a variety of vocational aptitude or interest inventory tests may be obtained to allow for a more objective means of localizing areas of interest. In general, these tests are most fruitful when self-corrected so as to involve the students as completely as possible in setting goals for themselves.

On the basis of this information on each youngster, we used the U.S. Department of Labor's annual publication, The Occupations Outlook Handbook, to select one or more broad areas of vocational interest such as, technical, clerical etc. From within these large career groupings three specific jobs or careers were to be chosen for closer in depth investigation. At this point we tried a four pronged approach. Taking the addresses from the Occupations Outlook Handbook, my students constructed their own letters requesting information from a variety of professional and labor organizations about their three jobs. Secondly, they summarized the information in our library's encyclopedias on the same three jobs. Thirdly, they outlined the three relevant articles in the Occupations Outlook Handbook itself. And fourthly, with an assist from me, they read a book or article on or by someone who had made a career of one of their three areas of interest. Once the written pamphlet material arrived, we were able to compare and analyze our four sources of information with an eye to their relative value and reliability. They needed to begin to distinguish the brochure's sweeping assurances and glamorous job descriptions from the more factual and documented appraisal offered by the U.S. Department of Labor.

Career Education - An Exceptional Addition To A Gifted Curriculum

They needed too, to consider whether career information from encyclopedias, biographies, and fictionalized accounts was in fact truly current and/or specific enough to really enable one to perceive the negative as well as positive aspects of the job.

From here we moved to a broad discussion of what information does the individual need before he can truly decide if a specific job genuinely suits his interests, capabilities, and life style. I simply wrote their questions up on the board and suddenly we had a list of some twenty odd things you'd want to ask of a prospective employer. To see if our questions were truly relevant and to start them off on developing interview techniques we invited into our classroom approximately a dozen adults willing to be closely questioned about every aspect of their careers. They came to us one at a time, in uniform where appropriate, and proved an invaluable first hand resource.

From there we moved to a group discussion of the kinds of questions an employer is likely to enquire of a job applicant. An assortment of sample application blanks can be obtained, dittoed off, and for fun you may want to tie this one in with a rudimentary lesson in typing if three or four machines are available on a loan basis. Then too the term resume should be introduced at this point. My kids tried writing their own by projecting themselves ahead to the time when obtaining a job would be an immediate first priority item. This particular exercise was, on the one hand, imaginative and, on the other, an attempt at appraising realizable educational potential. What followed thereafter was a series of role-playing sequences which were simultaneously hilarious, yet thoroughly instructive as one youngster assumed the position of a company interviewer and the other the job applicant. These were taped and replayed to allow for constructive criticism and suggestions by audience and subjects alike. If you can prevail on a local employer or even a building principal to participate directly as the interviewer so much the better. Now ask him to evaluate the relative merits and failings of each of the applicants who role-play with him. Fun too is the strategy of deliberately "hamming it up" - have a youngster or the teacher dramatize typical blunders

Career Education - An Exceptional Addition To A Gifted Curriculum

that may mar the job getting efforts of the neophyte. This one always brings down the house and speaks volumes no lecture could hope to convey so effectively.

Math skills seem to be at the beginning and end of many aspects of career education. An excellent starting point is involving your youngsters in figuring out just how many hours of their lives they can expect to spend in the World of Work. Then too a trip through the classified ads and follow-up phone calls can tell your students a lot about entry salaries into semi-skilled and skilled jobs. From there it's a short step to designing a hypothetical budget for a hypothetical young guy or gal on his or her first job. This activity can be extended to embrace a variety of math related skills. Even taxes, check writing, social security payments, and installment buying take on a fun aspect when they all have to fit under the umbrella of Mabel's \$95.00 a week pay. One thing I tried in this connection was a series of informal contact interviews with a wide variety of local workers in our community so my kids could work out the comparisons relative to rates of pay, commutation costs, union dues, additional training expenses, etc. Best of all, at least from their point of view, we ventured into a company of our own. That meant determining the costs involved in producing a product (pricing cooking ingredients, renting baking equipment, covering transportation cost to and from the grocery, paying our share of utilities used in the cooking, advertising cost, etc.). Once we had our costs figured out, we needed to settle on a reasonable percent of profit we hoped to accrue, and what we would therefore need to charge for our product. Capital was raised from our initial twenty-four stockholders, advertising front men were sent forth to sell our idea, and our cooking labors commenced as did some typical and thoroughly instructive labor troubles with an occasionally unreliable work force. Then came the matter of bookkeeping/banking problems, so we called in a consultant, a local businessman who'd

Career Education - An Exceptional Addition To A Gifted Curriculum

recently set up his own small business. He set us on the road to fiscal responsibility. In the end we amassed a total of \$650.00 of profit and about as many math lessons as well over a six month period.

Almost all of our projects were geared to the language arts curriculum. The letter writing projects, the dramatized interviews, the comparison of source materials alluded to previously all utilized oral and written communication skills. In addition I had each one of my students write creatively how they envisioned their performance on and their attitudes toward a job they could realistically expect to secure in the years ahead. Here the weeks of research, thought, and discussion bore fruition. They displayed a far more realistic view of the work-a-day world than they had shown initially when their oral speeches reflected uninstructed idealized notions and vague generalities where jobs were concerned. Now I had them translate this new and more realistic view of the adult work world into illustrated storybook form. They had to outline the essential work characteristics of a specific career typically found in most communities such as electrician or nurse. Now characters were named and a story about a career was written that still conveyed basic factual information a younger child could grasp - "A Typical Day in the Life of a Physicist" for instance was one title used. To break down traditional job stereotyping, many traditional roles were reversed so we had black lawyers and lady airline pilots. These books, complete with hard cover, were now available for teaching purposes in younger grades and for a permanent contribution to our school library.

No occupations program would be complete without at least a day in the World of Work. To start off with, each youngster was required to conduct and record specifics of an in depth interview with a working parent, relative, or neighbor concerning the pros and cons of work in their principal line of endeavor. Each worker interviewed was specifically asked to share with us their advice as to how a young person should go about preparing for entry into their career. Each one

Career Education - An Exceptional Addition To A Gifted Curriculum

of these was read aloud and widely discussed. From there we worked to set up one full day of actual on the job experience for each class member during the week of their spring vacation. While it was not possible in many cases for a youngster to work in the area of his own greatest expressed interest, we did get considerable cooperation from a great many parents and relatives, some of whom took as many as three or four youngsters for the day. Each youngster wrote up and evaluated what he'd actually learned about the day to day existence of a garage mechanic or a baker.

How to actually locate an available job, once you've taken a close look at your own skills and interests and researched the field in general, will necessitate a look at existing job locating facilities. A trip through the classified sections of the "New York Times" or your local newspaper, or even the yellow pages of your phone book can follow on the heels of visits to, or speakers from, your state employment service and a private employment agency. If your speakers are willing, have them bring some sample files on jobs currently available for high school graduates, junior and senior college graduates, and those candidates holding advanced degrees. These present openings should serve to vividly illustrate the stress some employers are bound to place on previous experience as well as on formal education.

You will want to wind up the unit, preferably in June, by assisting many of your students in securing summer employment of either a paid or a volunteer nature. Such an opportunity can provide excellent exposure to the general disciplines essential to holding any job, and more specifically a prolonged first hand view of a "real" job in action. In addition, good references and some on-the-job experience make the next summer job that much easier to come by. Quite a number of my fledging workers sought out and secured regular jobs in child care or lawn maintenance for July and August and propered greatly according to their own accounts and their first letters of reference proudly presented to me in the fall of each year.

Career Education - An Exceptional Addition To A Gifted Curriculum

Throughout the seven years that it was my privilege to contribute to the education of some of Commack, New York's brighter students I continued to add on to and enrich this program. As the topic is wonderfully elastic it allows for varying degrees of participation on the part of the instructor and students and can, therefore, be readily implemented to any extent desired. It requires no special tools nor unusual expenditure. What's needed is a ready imagination and a devotion to the importance of an invigorating and relevant education for the gifted child.

Career education can capture your student's enthusiastic interest and in all likelihood propel him on a trajectory fated to meet his inner needs whilst bestowing on the larger community the gifts his giftedness originally bestowed on him.

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